



# Exploring Primary School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying in Australia: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Bullying behaviour often increases in late childhood and peaks in early adolescence. While interventions to address bullying behaviour typically encourage students to report bullying incidents to school staff, students are often reluctant to report incidents for fear it will worsen their situation or because they lack confidence in a staff members' ability to intervene effectively. This study explores school staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour. School staff were recruited from Catholic and Independent schools in Perth, Western Australia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school staff ( $n = 19$ ) working with students in grades four to six (approximately 8–12 years). A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Staff reported a variety of responses to student reports of bullying incidents. Responses involved bullying targets, bullying perpetrators and the school community. School and individual factors found to influence staff responses included life experiences, adequate time to deal with bullying and the influence of colleagues. Suggested strategies to improve staff responses were clear school policies and procedures, scheduled times to deal with student reports, databases to record bullying incidents and professional development for school staff.

**Keywords** Bullying · Teachers · Policy · Schools · Children · Qualitative

## Introduction

Bullying is a significant public health problem affecting school students (Rigby, 2020a). Bullying behaviour increases in late childhood and peaks in early adolescence (Cross et al., 2009). A 2015 study with 287 Australian primary schools found approximately 20% of students in grade four reported being bullied by peers on a weekly basis (Thomson et al., 2017). In another Australian study, approximately 60% of students in grade four, six and eight reported being bullied at least once in the same term the survey was administered (Lietz et al., 2015).

Often referred to as peer victimisation (Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005), bullying can be defined as '...any intentional and repeated

behaviour which causes physical, emotional or social harm to a person who has, or is perceived to have, less power than the person who bullies' (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020, p. 364). Bullying can be 'overt' or 'covert'. Overt behaviours are more easily witnessed and can include any physical act such as hitting or shoving, while covert behaviours are less visible and can include social exclusion or gossiping (Byers et al., 2011). Furthermore, cyber bullying uses technology platforms such as mobile devices or the internet to spread harmful and offensive material (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020).

School bullying has been associated with a range of psychological and emotional health problems. In the short term, bullying targets can experience headaches, sleep disorders, anxiety, low-self-esteem, lack of concentration and poor educational achievement (Karatas & Ozturk, 2011). Bullying perpetration has been linked to mental health problems and involvement in antisocial behaviours (Espelage et al., 2013; Karatas & Ozturk, 2011). Bystanders to bullying behaviour are also at an increased risk of experiencing depression and anxiety and fear becoming the next target of the bullying perpetrator (Midgett & Dumas, 2019).

School staff play a vital role in responding to student reports of bullying behaviour as they are within the vicinity

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of students for most of the school day (Burger et al., 2015). While interventions to address bullying behaviour in the school environment typically encourage students to report bullying incidents to school staff, students are often reluctant to report incidents for fear it will worsen their situation or because they lack confidence in staff member's ability to intervene effectively (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Shaw et al., 2019). If student reports of bullying are dismissed by school staff, perpetrators may hold greater power over their targets, increasing the likelihood of repeated bullying incidents (Shaw et al., 2019).

The dismissal of bullying incidents may also reinforce a school ethos that is tolerant of bullying, resulting in decreased reporting of future incidents (Shaw et al., 2019). A review of school climate research found a supportive and caring school environment was associated with a reduction in bullying behaviour. Effective school bullying prevention efforts must target individual and school processes, such as building relational trust between school staff and students (Thapa et al., 2013). Efforts to identify and improve school staff responses to student reports of bullying are therefore warranted.

### School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

Several studies have explored school staff responses to observed (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Byers et al., 2011; Ellis & Shute, 2007; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Waasdorp et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2016) or hypothesised bullying incidents (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Byers et al., 2011; Ellis & Shute, 2007; Marshall et al., 2009; Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Yoon et al., 2016). Some studies found staff responded to reports of bullying by disciplining the bullying perpetrator (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012; Yoon et al., 2016), while others reported that staff worked with the bullying perpetrator to recognise and improve their behaviour (Burger et al., 2015; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011). Other staff responses included involving other teachers (Marshall et al., 2009) and teaching the bullying target prosocial skills including how to cope in difficult situations and build resilience (Yoon et al., 2016). However, limited studies have explored school staff responses when students report bullying incidents (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Novick & Isaacs, 2010; Rigby, 2020b). Rigby's (2020b) investigation into Australian primary school students' perceptions of how school staff responded to student reports of bullying found that sanctions or disciplinary measures, including telling the bully to stop and asking the bully to apologise, were used most frequently by school staff.

Bradshaw et al. (2007) identified school staff responses to both observed bullying and student reports of bullying from the perspective of students and teachers from middle and

high schools in the United States (US). All teachers reported either talking to an administrator, intervening with the target or talking to the bullying perpetrator's parents in response to student reports of bullying. However, some students who disclosed bullying incidents to adults reported that school staff did not take any action (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Another US study compared middle school teachers' likelihood of intervening in a bullying situation when they observed a bullying incident and when told by a student. Being told about a bullying incident by a student was the strongest predictor of teacher involvement, with teachers providing coaching (e.g. advising students how to respond to incidents), offering support (e.g. education on conflict management) and enhancing social skills (e.g. encouraging peers to include someone who was being left out) (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). A greater understanding of the factors influencing staff responses will assist researchers and educators in identifying strategies to improve staff responses to student reports of bullying.

### Factors Influencing School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

Few studies have examined factors influencing school staff responses to student reports of bullying. Novick and Isaacs (2010) explored school staff perceptions of how prepared staff are to deal with a reported bullying incident. The correlation between being told about bullying and coaching students on how to manage bullying was most evident when school staff reported being highly prepared to handle bullying situations (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). Several other studies have explored the influence of individual or school factors on school staff responses to observed or hypothesised bullying incidents and found the likelihood of staff intervening in a bullying incident was influenced by perceived self-efficacy (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Byers et al., 2011; Duong & Bradshaw, 2013; O'Brennan et al., 2014; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018; Yoon, 2004; Yoon & Bauman, 2014; Yoon et al., 2016), perceived seriousness of the bullying incident (Byers et al., 2011; Dedousis-Wallace & Shute, 2009; Ellis & Shute, 2007; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018; Yoon et al., 2016; Yoon, 2004), teaching experience (Burger et al., 2015; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; Waasdorp et al., 2021) and staff training about bullying behaviour and management (Power-Elliott & Harris, 2012).

### Strategies to Improve School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

Several studies have suggested strategies and interventions to improve school staff responses to bullying, including educating staff about bullying behaviour and improving staff confidence and efficacy when responding to bullying incidents (Bauman et al., 2008; Burger et al., 2015; Byers et al., 2011; Ellis & Shute, 2007; Fischer & Bilz, 2019; Marshall et al.,

2009; Sairanen & Pfeffer, 2011; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018; Yoon et al., 2016; Yoon, 2004). However, only one study provided specific recommendations to improve school staff responses when a student reports a bullying incident (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). These recommendations included offering staff professional development opportunities to build staff efficacy and develop appropriate staff responses when students report a bullying incident (Novick & Isaacs, 2010).

Strategies to support staff when addressing bullying behaviour may differ for reported and observed bullying incidents. Reported incidents may require more time from staff as it can be difficult for staff to gather information and ascertain how to respond to reported incidents that they did not witness (Mishna et al., 2005; Novick & Isaacs, 2010). Past research indicates that bullying occurs most frequently in areas where staff supervision is limited (Novick & Isaacs, 2010). While Novick and Isaacs (2010) found that being told about bullying was the greatest predictor of school staff intervention, Bradshaw et al. (2007) found school staff were less likely to respond when students reported bullying. As school staff may be more likely to respond to bullying incidents that they witness, further research is needed to identify strategies to improve responses to reported incidents (Novick & Isaacs, 2010).

Given the dearth of information about factors and strategies influencing school staff responses when students report a bullying incident, qualitative research is required to explore the combination of individual and school factors which predict staff responses to real-life bullying situations and identify strategies which focus on the education of teachers and their preparedness to intervene in reported bullying situations (VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018; Yoon, 2004; Yoon et al., 2016).

The current qualitative study explores primary school staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour. Staff working with students from grades four to six (approximately 8–12 years) were recruited. The study objectives were to:

1. Explore school staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour;
2. Explore school and individual factors influencing school staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour; and
3. Explore whole school strategies and interventions which focus on the education and readiness of school staff to improve responses to student reports of bullying behaviour.

## Methods

### Ethics Approval

Ethics approval to conduct this study was granted by The Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia (Approval Number: RA/4/20/4995) and Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee

(HRE2021-0113), with governance approval also granted by Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA).

### Study Design

This study used an exploratory qualitative design to investigate the lived experiences of school staff. The study design was guided by a socio-ecological model of health and human behaviour that recognised, individual and school factors (i.e. social environmental, built environmental and policy factors) influencing school staff responses to student reports of bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988).

### Participants and Recruitment

Study participants were recruited from Catholic and Independent primary schools in metropolitan Perth, Western Australia. Government schools were not included in this study as the approval process to conduct research on government school sites in Western Australia was likely to exceed the time allocated to this study (i.e. 9 months), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Department of Education was prioritising non-research activities. Participant eligibility criteria therefore included school staff working with students in grades four to six from Catholic and Independent schools. Students in grades four to six were chosen for this study as previous research has indicated that bullying behaviour in Australian primary school students is highest in this age group (Cross et al., 2009). School staff included, but were not limited to, principals and deputies, classroom teachers, specialist subject teachers and school counsellors or psychologists. A total of 70 schools (Catholic,  $n = 30$ ) and (Independent,  $n = 40$ ) were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study between May and August 2021. Due to a low response rate, a second round of recruitment was initiated. A further 80 schools (Catholic,  $n = 47$ ; Independent,  $n = 33$ ) in the Perth Metropolitan Area were purposively selected and invited to participate in the study.

School principals were emailed an information sheet and provided consent for school participation. School staff were purposively selected by school principals. Nominated staff were invited to participate in the study via email. Up to two reminder invitations were sent. All study participants provided the research team with their written consent.

### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews ( $n = 19$ ) were conducted by telephone or video conference between June and August 2021.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team were unable to facilitate face-to-face meetings in schools. The interview discussion guide was informed by a literature review that identified factors influencing staff responses to bullying behaviour (Bauman et al., 2008; Byers et al., 2011; VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018; Yoon et al., 2016), as well as staff responses involving bullying perpetrators, bullying targets, peers and the broader school community (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Novick & Isaacs, 2010; Rigby, 2020b) (Online resource 1). The discussion guide was also informed by a socio-ecological model of health and human behaviour which recognises the interrelationship between individuals and their surrounding environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988). Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and McLeroy et al.'s (1988) model, our study identified the interrelationship between individual, social environmental, built environmental and policy factors influencing school staff responses to student reports of bullying. The discussion guide was pilot tested with two adults for readability and completeness and focused on school staff responses, school and individual factors influencing school staff responses and strategies to improve school staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour. No changes to the discussion guide were required.

A definition of bullying adapted from Vaillancourt and colleagues (2010) was provided to participants prior to commencing the interview. An interviewer-administered survey was completed by participants at the conclusion of their interview to capture demographic information. Interviews were approximately 30 to 45 min and were audio recorded. A list of mental health support services was provided in case participants experienced discomfort or concerns about the issues discussed.

## Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and then imported into version 12.1 of QSR NVivo and thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is useful for gaining unexpected insights into the perspectives of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. To gain a thorough understanding of the data, the lead author commenced a familiarisation process, reading through each transcript and making external notes about themes (Jeffrey & Stuart, 2019). A deductive coding framework was initially developed based on the individual, social environmental, built environmental and policy factors underpinning the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988; Dubuc et al., 2021) and the study objectives (Online resource 2). Staff responses were coded as responses involving bullying perpetrators, bullying targets, peers and

the school community based on our professional understanding of bullying behaviours and terms used in the current bullying literature. Factors influencing staff responses were collapsed into individual and school (social environmental, built environmental and policy) factors.

The framework was refined as specific sub-themes were identified from the data. A process of line-by-line analysis was used and transcripts were repeatedly read by all authors to enhance the dependability of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011) and ensure a credible interpretation of data (Liamputtong, 2017). Codes were grouped into categories informed by the study objectives and socio-ecological factors influencing health and human behaviour. Categories were then simplified and grouped into core themes. Coding occurred in conjunction with data collection and continued until data saturation was achieved and codes were repeated in multiple interviews. A codebook was exported from version 12.1 of QSR NVivo (Online resource 3). Findings have been reported using a participant number and gender. The terms 'few', 'some' and 'most' have been used to describe data to reflect the level of agreement and discussion about themes (Neale et al., 2014). Key quotes have been selected to illustrate the findings.

## Findings

Nineteen school staff member's aged between 20 and 61 years from eight schools (six Catholic and two Independent) participated in the study. Most participants (84.2%) identified as female. Participants included classroom teachers, health service staff and school administrators. Participant characteristics are captured in Table 1.

### School Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

School staff (here-after referred to as staff) responses to the bullying target and perpetrator were categorised into responses involving bullying targets, responses involving bullying perpetrators and responses involving the school community (Fig. 1).

### Staff Responses Involving Bullying Targets and Perpetrators

Responses involving bullying targets and perpetrators fell into four categories: (i) listening and discussion; (ii) the provision of practical support; (iii) referrals to the school community; and (iv) behavioural and disciplinary action.

**Table 1** Participant characteristics

| Characteristic                  | n  | %    |
|---------------------------------|----|------|
| Gender                          |    |      |
| Female                          | 16 | 15.7 |
| Male                            | 3  | 84.2 |
| Age (years)                     |    |      |
| 20–30                           | 4  | 21.0 |
| 31–40                           | 4  | 21.0 |
| 41–50                           | 8  | 42.0 |
| 51–60                           | 2  | 10.5 |
| 61–70                           | 1  | 5.3  |
| Born in Australia               |    |      |
| Yes                             | 17 | 89.5 |
| No                              | 2  | 10.5 |
| School ICSEA <sup>a</sup>       |    |      |
| 1000–1049                       | 6  | 31.6 |
| 1050–1099                       | 7  | 36.8 |
| 1100–1149                       | 6  | 31.6 |
| Staff role                      |    |      |
| Classroom teacher               | 10 | 52.6 |
| Health service staff            | 5  | 26.3 |
| Administrator                   | 4  | 21.0 |
| Working with schools (years)    |    |      |
| ≤ 10                            | 9  | 47.4 |
| 11–20                           | 5  | 26.3 |
| 21+                             | 5  | 26.3 |
| Working in current role (years) |    |      |
| ≤ 10                            | 17 | 89.5 |
| 11–20                           | 1  | 5.3  |
| 21+                             | 1  | 5.3  |

<sup>a</sup>ICSEA refers to Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage. Australian schools are assigned an ICSEA which is calculated using data related to parent's occupation and education, post code and proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. (Range approximately 500–1300, median 1000), lower ICSEA equates to greater disadvantage (Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority, 2015)

## Listening and Discussion

Most participants addressed reported bullying incidents by talking to the students involved and validating their feelings. Participants often noted that their responses involving bullying targets and perpetrators were similar:

I will give the child and the person that they are concerned about the opportunity to complete or give a statement... they get an opportunity to write specifically what's happened, who were the people that were there. And I'm just trying to get behind the reasoning for what's happened. So that's the general approach that we take to investigate and to make sure that we get both sides of the story. (School Staff (SS) #10, male).

The nature of the incident was also discussed. School staff noted the importance of determining whether a reported incident fit the definition of bullying. Clarifying the nature of the incident was thought to assist staff in determining appropriate strategies for intervention:

My experience would be that there's a lot of [bullying] reports in schools [from] children, particularly in primary schools, and so teachers need to identify is this bullying or is this something different? Is this something that needs strategies? So, in this instance... this [reported incident] was repeated, there was a power differential. (SS #6, female).

## Practical Support

Practical support offered by staff to bullying targets included: building resilience, providing emotional support and teaching social skills. As one participant noted:

I did let him know that kids are going to say things in years, 6, 7, 8, 9. I said I'd like to build a new resiliency in terms of how you cope with things when kids say things to you. We talked about that, which will be an ongoing thing in helping him. (SS #12, male).

Additionally, practical support offered by staff to bullying perpetrators included the use of restorative practices. In response to a reported incident, participants provided support to help the bullying perpetrator understand how their actions were wrong:

We bring them to a point of understanding of what I've done is wrong and the restorative justice to understanding their role has made a mistake and made the other person feel bad. It's possible for some staff to think just hit them hard with a punishment. So, helping them understand their role and that they would also love to be loved and cared for... is a big part of the process in restoring what's broken. (SS #12, male).

Some participants also provided students with behavioural management strategies:

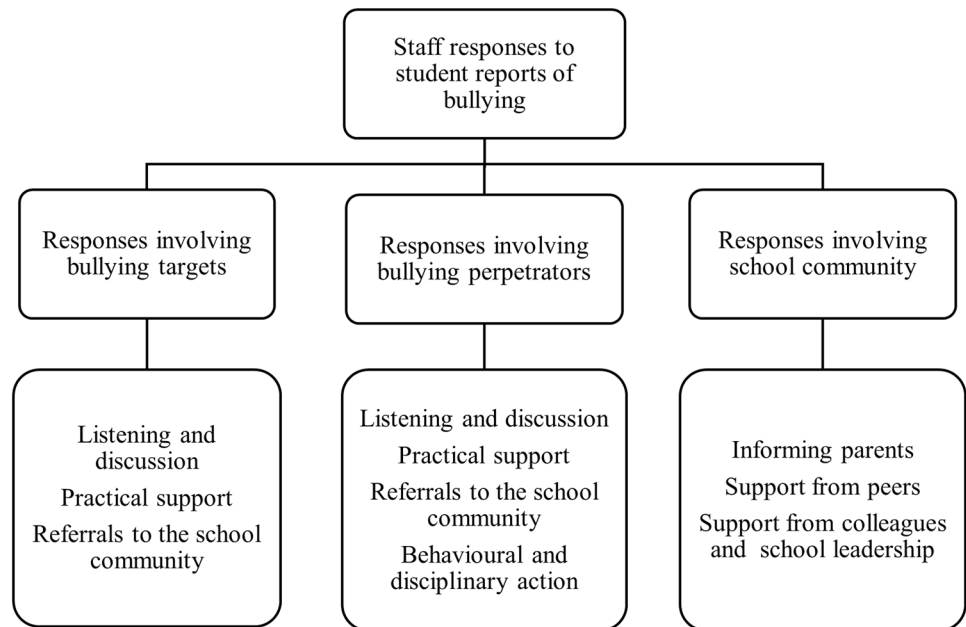
Teaching those anger management strategies and reminding them to take a deep breath, walk away or speak in a calm voice, explain what you're feeling, giving them the tools to cope with when they're feeling really angry and frustrated with another student. (SS #15, female).

## Referrals to the School Community

Participants discussed referring both the bullying target and perpetrator onto the school counsellor or psychologist:



**Fig. 1** School staff responses to student reports of bullying



They [Bullying target and perpetrator] were also working with the school social worker. So, she did a whole work up on how to apologise and included the target in that so that the perpetrator could see how his words and actions were hurting the other child. (SS #19, female).

### Behavioural and Disciplinary Action

Behavioural management and disciplinary responses by staff involving the bullying perpetrator included placing students on a behaviour plan, increasing staff supervision of students, limiting their play time and providing warnings for misbehaviour. Notably, disciplinary responses emerged less frequently than other behavioural strategies. As one participant noted:

Obviously, there was disciplinary action within our school procedures. So, they [bullying perpetrators] had three warnings. And then they had to sit out for half of lunch. (SS #19, female).

### Staff Responses Involving the School Community

Staff responses also involved the school community and fell into three categories: (i) informing parents; (ii) seeking support from students' peers; and (iii) seeking support from colleagues and leadership teams.

#### Informing Parents

Some participants discussed contacting the parents of both the bullying target and perpetrator to inform them of the

situation and find out information, as well as organising parent meetings with the students involved and the school principal:

I always let parents know if their child has come to me with an incident during the day via email or phone call just to touch base with them, because sometimes I find that [the children] only tell me a portion of what's happened. (SS #1, female).

#### Seeking Support from Students' Peers

Some staff sought help from the peers of students involved in the bullying incident. Responses involving peers included discussing the bullying incidents and gathering additional information, educating class members about bullying and asking peers to support bullying targets. As one participant noted when discussing peer support of targets of bullying:

It was getting [the bullying target] to understand that's not what everybody thinks about them and then trying to get the other kids in the class to rally behind them at recess and lunch and include them in a different game so that they weren't subject to that person bullying. (SS #19, female).

#### Seeking Support from Colleagues and Leadership Teams

Most participants consulted colleagues such as classroom and duty teachers, about how to respond to student reports of bullying. This communication occurred formally and informally, with staff members working together to monitor the behaviour of the students involved:

There's a lot of conversation between teachers and everybody knows the situations going on at school. So, we support each other in the playground, keeping an eye out for those students that have said that there's an issue. So, we might say on our way in, oh this happened can you keep an eye on that little group during lunches. (SS #8, female).

In some cases, participants would refer the situation onto leadership or administrative staff:

Depending on the severity of the incident, our deputy or head of pastoral care might step in and take over that incident. (SS #14, female).

### Factors Influencing Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

Several factors that potentially influence staff responses to student reports of bullying were identified. These have been grouped into individual and school factors (Fig. 2).

#### Individual Factors

Several individual factors were found to potentially influence staff responses to student reports of bullying, including staff gender, life experiences, beliefs about staff responsibilities to manage bullying behaviour, staff understanding of bullying and labelling students.

#### Staff Gender

Some participants noted different approaches taken by male and female staff when responding to reported bullying

incidents. Female staff were perceived to take a more nurturing approach than males and were considered to be more understanding of student's needs:

Female teachers will be a bit more mothering in a way to children where some of the male staff are a bit more like: 'okay, yeah, I'm not going to mother you. You need to become more independent'. (SS #10 male).

Additionally, male staff were perceived by some participants as more likely to refer incidents onto school leadership teams quickly and take less time dealing with the incident themselves:

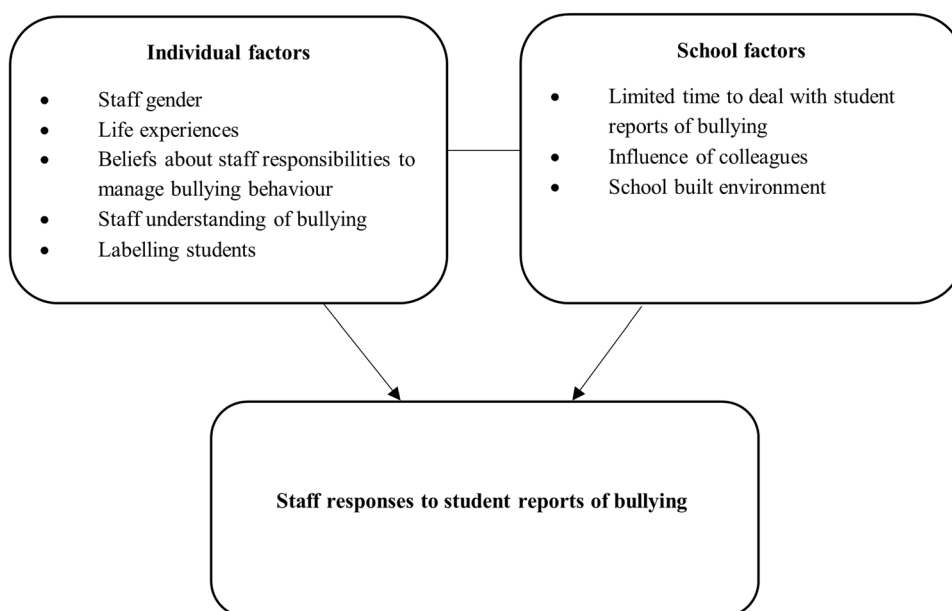
But I do think that the female teachers will probably just put a bit extra in, spend a bit more time on incidents like [bullying], where I found that the male teachers, probably shifted on a little bit faster to me where the female teachers would take time out and really put time into it. (SS #10, male).

#### Life Experiences

When asked about individual factors influencing responses to student reports of bullying, most participants drew on their own life experiences, either as a teacher or in their personal life, to guide responses to student reports of bullying. For example, teachers who have experienced bullying as a child may be more inclined to support targeted students:

I think a teacher will respond to bullying from their own personal experiences in life .... If you've felt bullied yourself, you might be more proactive about helping students that you see are consistently left out or put down. (SS #15, female).

**Fig. 2** Factors influencing staff responses to student reports of bullying



## Beliefs About Staff Responsibilities to Manage Bullying Behaviour

All staff interviewed believed teachers are responsible for managing student behaviour. Participants suggested this responsibility was embedded in their duty of care. The need to be aware of school policies and procedures was also noted:

[All staff have] a duty of care as soon as children come on site. So, it is everybody's responsibility to be aware of what the policies are at their schools and to be able to appropriately deal with any complaints that come their way off. (SS #10, male).

Nonetheless, staff also noted that some of their colleagues did not believe it was the teacher's responsibility to manage student bullying behaviour. Most staff recognised that dealing with student reports of bullying is a time-consuming responsibility added to an already demanding workload:

You almost don't want to deal with [bullying] because it is a lot of work and it takes a lot of effort. And it's not just a one off conversation you're having, it's something you need to monitor constantly... so it's definitely the responsibility of the teacher. But as a teacher, it's not something you want to have to deal with because it's a lot of extra stuff you have to do. But you do it because you care for your students. (SS #4, male).

## Teachers' Understanding of Bullying

Some participants discussed how a teacher's understanding of what constitutes bullying can also influence their response to a bullying incident:

Depending on that teacher's idea of what bullying is, they could end up rolling their eyes and going, oh, here we go it's another one. And, you know, go away and sort it out type thing. Or it's just a friendship fire off you go. So, it really depends on the other teacher's attitude. (SS #15, female).

## Labelling Students

Labelling students based on their reputation, personality and existing relationship with the staff member emerged as a major theme when discussing individual factors influencing staff responses to student reports of bullying:

If a student doesn't have a very good reputation and they're known for being a troublemaker, then I think it's easier to give them the label of a bully because you'd expect that kind of behaviour from that student. (SS #3, female).

Some participants have also discussed labelling students based on their personality traits, with the concerns of more favoured students receiving greater consideration:

If there's a kid who's always kind, friendly and respectful and then comes up to a staff member and says someone said something like repeatedly to me and are putting me down, I think that would be different to a kid who is a bit rough around the edges and swears. (SS #12, male).

Additionally, some participants perceive students who are constantly reporting incidents to staff as the 'annoying or dobbing student'. Participants noted that while there was the temptation for staff to take a reported incident less seriously if it comes from a student perceived to be annoying, it was still necessary to consider all incidents:

It's the annoying dobbing kids that come up all the time that are labelled ... they've always got a problem... but we just need to be really conscious of what they're coming and telling you still, otherwise they could come up and tell you something and you've just thought it's something little and it might not be. (SS #1, female).

Furthermore, if a teacher had an existing positive relationship with a student, some participants perceived the teacher may take a more relaxed approach with the bullying perpetrator in hope of maintaining their relationship with the students:

It's more they'll have different type of banter with the children... it's more like I've got a good relationship with the children. I don't want to spoil that relationship. (SS #10, male).

## School Factors

Several school factors were found to potentially influence staff responses to student reports of bullying including limited time to deal with bullying reports, influence of colleagues and the school built environment.

### Limited Time to Deal with Bullying Reports

Having the time to effectively manage and respond to student reports of bullying emerged as a major theme and was considered a barrier for most staff. Staff experience immense pressure throughout the day, with a demanding curriculum and many responsibilities including report writing and parent interviews:

It's just having time [that influences staff responses]. Time can be a really difficult factor when you are deal-



ing with so much within a day, and particularly with things like bullying. (SS #2, female).

Classroom teachers noted that it can be difficult to provide appropriate care for students who report bullying during a lesson, but also recognised that not having time to respond to a student's report of bullying can reduce the likelihood of students reporting future incidents:

If a child has gone to a teacher and the teacher is right in the middle of a lesson and didn't stop and give them the necessary time, the child might feel that the teacher isn't supporting them or doesn't want to listen to them and then they will next time just not go to the teacher with that concern.

(SS #10, male).

One participant also noted that time to address reports of bullying can be influenced by the size of the class:

If you have 30 children in your room for six hours, you don't always have a lot of time to get to the bottom of some stuff. (SS #11, female).

### Influence of Colleagues

Observing colleagues handle bullying situations emerged as a major theme. Most staff discussed how colleagues' role modelling of both positive and negative responses to reported bullying incidents influenced their own behaviour:

As you learn and grow and become more experienced as a teacher, you take bits and pieces from other teachers. You know, oh I like the way they did that, or I didn't really like what they did. So, learning from how they've dealt with difficult situations and bullying. I've taken those facts and apply them to how I deal with them. (SS #20, female).

Furthermore, some staff were more inclined to work with students after observing their colleagues dismiss children's concerns:

I have seen in the past children's concerns dismissed and that hasn't sat well so I suppose that's why I am a little bit more willing to give a child a go and sit down and listen to them (SS #7, female).

### School Built Environment

The school's physical or built environment was considered important with the need for safe spaces for staff and students to discuss issues highlighted. For example, one participant noted the importance of having private spaces with seating in the school to discuss reported bullying incidents with students:

We have a lot of benches around our school, so we've got a lot of places for staff members to be able to go and sit down with a student and discuss something. And it allows us the opportunity to speak to all children involved in an environment where other people aren't overhearing. And so, they're feeling quite comfortable and safe to voice their concerns. Having that breakout space to go and speak to students without anyone listening makes a massive difference. (SS #14, female).

### Strategies to Improve Staff Responses to Student Reports of Bullying

Participants identified several strategies which could be easily implemented to improve staff responses to student reports of bullying. These included (i) clear school policies and procedures for responding to student reports of bullying; (ii) professional development for staff about understanding bullying and responding to different incidents; (iii) assigning time for staff to deal with reports of bullying; and (iv) keeping a school database of bullying incidents.

#### Clear School Policies and Procedures

Having clear and consistent school policies and procedures outlining appropriate responses to student reports of bullying was considered paramount. This ensures consistency but also enhances staff confidence in their response:

Having a program or a policy or a process that starts by going okay, number one when this has been reported to me is to do this and number two is to do this just so that there's consistency across all teacher is really important. (SS #14, female).

I think staff is very confident because nowadays there are policies put in place and procedures that we all follow. (SS #2, female).

However, some participants were aware that there was no specific policy or procedure for responding to student reports of bullying at their school:

We don't have a black and white type procedure. We give kids a fresh start every day and we deal with an incident as it occurs. That's sort of in our bullying policy. But how we deal with in terms of pushing it up the chain, we haven't got that written down. (SS #7, female).

Participants also identified the importance of adopting a whole school approach to bullying. In particular, participants noted that all staff need a common language to understand and describe bullying, as well as a universal policy

or procedure to guide their responses to student reports of bullying incidents:

It would be really beneficial to do more whole school. And I know once again, this is about time and money, but I do think a whole school approach where every single staff member, including educational assistants, are all talking the same language around bullying and really know what it is and what it isn't... dealing with [bullying] scenarios is very complex, which is why I think the process needs to be really clear because it's already kind of emotionally taxing. (SS #11, female).

Clear and concise policies and procedures were also seen to be beneficial in ensuring responses were consistent and to reduce staff time. Assigned time in the school day to deal with bullying incidents was recommended. One participant described the school behaviour management plan as a useful example:

In the same way that we do have a very specific... but very simple flowchart for behaviour management... I do think that it would be beneficial for staff who are really busy to have something similar in the case of bullying. And I just think that can be very helpful for people, because I think a big part of the issue is that because people are time poor, it's hard to wrap your head around different processes. (SS #11, female).

### Professional Development

Staff identified the need for professional development opportunities focusing on understanding bullying and how to respond to complex situations. When considering a preference for staff professional development opportunities, workshops were identified by many staff as a preferred method of delivery as staff can share and discuss their experiences:

I think [we need] more training for staff around identifying and assessing what is a bullying situation and some case studies with some understanding around different responses for different situations. (SS #6, female).

I think in person, if you're talking about training for staff it's workshoping and discussion and looking at how responses would be most helpful in the complex nature of it. That would be the best delivery. Because it's helpful to be able to really discuss the complex nature of it and workshop things together. (SS #6, female).

Nonetheless, staff also noted that finding the time to undertake professional development and additional training in person was a difficulty faced by many staff:

People are trying to make it easier for people who don't have a lot of time and they're just putting it on [computer program] or some kind of read this policy. And as much as I think 'oh, no, we don't have the time', I think for something as big as bullying and for something that is so connected to everybody's well-being, it needs to be prioritized, it needs to be done in person. (SS #11, female).

Furthermore, in addition to staff training on bullying and school policies and procedures addressing staff responses to bullying incidents, some participants recommended having programs which educate staff about how to respond when a bullying incident is reported by a student:

More current programs... or some advice that's distributed to teachers more regularly, that could be good. Or if there's specific programs or training that we can do for teachers at school on how to respond that would also be good. (SS #10, male).

While participants expressed interest in professional development, staff training and focused programs to enhance their skills in responding to student reports of bullying, lack of time to participate was a barrier:

I think an issue is just time. And teachers at our school, often we speak about, that we don't have enough time to do these programs, even though we know how amazing and how beneficial it would be to the students. (SS #20, female).

### Assigned Time to Deal with Reports of Bullying

Providing staff with assigned time to deal with reports of bullying emerged as a strategy to improve staff responses to student reports of bullying:

We absolutely need to be given the time to speak to our students because often if I don't have a [Duties Other Than Teaching] session or recess or a lunch time... that I'm able to then sit with that student and kind of gauge what's happened... I might need to leave the classroom and speak to them outside... but often if I'm in the middle of teaching, it really impacts the depth of that conversation. So, having the ability to have someone to look after your class. Because often if that child has come to you, they want to speak to you. And I would worry that if I was passing it off, the child might not be completely truthful or open about what's happened. (SS #14, female).

One participant, a social worker, discussed how bullying incidents are often referred on to school counsellors or social

workers for assistance due to staff having a lack of time to deal with the incident themselves. Having someone who can come into a classroom and relieve a teacher of their teaching duties so that they can discuss a bullying incident with one of their students was considered a helpful strategy:

I think having more social workers, relieving teachers so that they can actually build that rapport with their students. If teachers could be released from their teaching duties to have more time to sort out some of these social problems with children, that would be helpful. Ideally it should be dealt with by the teacher and sometimes it is hand balled to me because the teachers haven't got time. (SS #18, female).

### Keeping a School Record of Bullying Incidents

Some participants expressed difficulty assessing whether a reported incident could be classified as bullying as they did not witness the incident, especially new teachers at a school who are not as familiar with the history of students. A suggested strategy to improve staff responses was to keep a school record of bullying incidents to support staff in tracking incidents and identifying if a bullying behaviour is repeated:

We also have a good database of recording all of what has happened to sort of track if there has been ongoing [incidents] and looking back over the years you can see if there are patterns. (SS #12, male).

If I happen to sort something out in the playground, I log a brief description of what happened, who was involved and who their teacher is, and I can actually click on the teacher and they get notified of what was sorted out at lunchtime. (SS #1, female).

## Discussion

This study recognises that staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour may include a range of responses involving bullying targets, bullying perpetrators and the broader school community, as reflected in the published literature exploring school staff responses to observed or hypothesised bullying behaviour (Burger et al., 2015; De Luca et al., 2019; Duong & Bradshaw, 2013; Waasdorp et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2016). Guided by the socio-ecological model of health and human behaviour, our qualitative study considered how a broad range of individual, social environmental, built environmental and policy factors influenced staff responses to student reports of bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988; Dubuc et al., 2021). Findings from the study were coded into two groups of factors: individual and school factors, with school factors

encompassing social environmental, built environmental and policy factors. Individual factors included staff gender, life experiences, beliefs about bullying, understanding of bullying and labelling students. School factors included limited time to deal with bullying reports, the influence of colleagues and the school built environment. Practical recommendations for whole-school strategies were made by participants with a focus on staff training and developing clear policies and procedures for responding to reported bullying incidents.

The staff responses of listening and discussion and providing practical support were commonly used with bullying targets. Supportive responses by staff, including finding out what happened and building resilience, were frequently used with bullying targets in other studies (Marshall et al., 2009; Rigby, 2020b; Yoon et al., 2016). A successful component of anti-bullying interventions in schools has been informal peer involvement where students have group discussions about bullying experiences and attitudes (Gaffney et al., 2021). This strategy ensures that targeted students are not singled out and aims to reinforce a positive classroom ethos (Gaffney et al., 2021). Although some of our study participants reported discussing bullying incidents with peers, staff need to be mindful about protecting the confidentiality of targeted students.

In contrast to Bauman et al. (2008) and Sairanen and Pfeffer (2011), our findings showed very few staff reported disciplining bullying perpetrators and instead provided supportive responses. Other studies have also found staff used supportive-individual responses including gathering information, talking with the students involved and providing emotional support more frequently than punitive responses (Burger et al., 2015; Wachs et al., 2019). Consistent with previous research (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Yoon & Kerber, 2003), no participants reported dismissing or ignoring a student's concerns, although it is possible participants answered questions in a manner they believed to be socially acceptable. Lack of time to deal with bullying reports emerged as a strong factor influencing staff responses. Reference was made to the possibility that staff may be dismissive of student's reports if they do not have adequate time. Our finding that staff may be dismissive of student's reports of bullying behaviour is supported by the published literature (Mishna et al., 2005).

Several individual factors were hypothesised by staff to influence responses to student reports of bullying including life experiences and staff gender. Other studies have also found that staff who experienced bullying as a child were more proactive about supporting and helping targeted students (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Mishna et al., 2005). Our findings show that staff member's personal experiences of bullying are likely to shape their attitudes and beliefs about the seriousness of bullying and willingness to

support students. In contrast, Yoon et al. (2016) found that staff who had been targets of bullying as a child were more likely to discipline bullying perpetrators and do nothing in response to bullying targets. The authors suggested that the difficult experience of being bullied influenced staff to be more proactive in their responses to bullying perpetrators yet were reluctant to support the target (Yoon et al., 2016). This reluctance to support targets of bullying may reflect the staff member's learned helplessness; however, further research is required. Furthermore, staff gender may influence responses. As supported by Yoon et al. (2016) who found female staff rated bullying more seriously than males, our findings showed some female staff may take more time and care in responding to reports of bullying. Although further investigation into the influence of staff gender is required.

Our study also found that labelling students was a factor influencing staff responses, with staff labelling students as bullying perpetrators based on their positive or negative perception of the student, previous behaviours or reputation. Mishna et al. (2005) also found that staff did not take complaints seriously if they had previously placed favourable labels on students they perceived to 'have friends' and be 'well liked'. Our findings suggested that favourable students were also viewed more positively by staff members. The mismanagement of bullying incidents has the potential to encourage persistent bullying behaviours from students who are perceived to be perpetrators of bullying (Burns et al., 2008).

Several school factors were hypothesised by staff to influence responses to student reports of bullying including lack of time to deal with bullying reports. Consistent with previous research (Mishna et al., 2005), staff expressed concern about their lack of time to deal with reported incidents due to a demanding curriculum and other teaching responsibilities. These findings also reflect an Australian study exploring implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) for the prevention and management of violence, bullying and aggressive behaviours. Findings from 106 schools throughout Australia attributed low levels of implementation of the NSSF strategies to insufficient time and staff expertise to implement whole-school prevention strategies (Cross et al., 2011). Implementation can however be achieved if schools are supported. For example, schools participating in a 4-year bullying prevention capacity building project reported implementation of local school policy to support bullying prevention (Pearce et al., 2022). At a local level, most schools in Australia have the freedom to develop and implement their own bullying and behavioural management policies.

Furthermore, most staff in the current study recognised the importance of listening to students and providing appropriate care, despite acknowledging that staff often have little time or patience to deal with some bullying incidents. Similarly, while all staff believed that it is their responsibility

to manage student behaviour, staff recognised that dealing with student reports is time-consuming. Providing staff with additional time to deal with bullying reports during school hours may increase the effectiveness of staff responses.

Several practical strategies to improve staff responses to student reports of bullying have been identified. Consistent with other findings (Astor et al., 1999), participants in our study recommended clear school policies and procedures for responding to student reports of bullying, as well as a whole-school approach to bullying behaviour. Participants recommended a school policy or procedure that clearly outlines the process that staff should follow when a student reports a bullying incident. However, Cross et al. (2011) reported a low implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework bullying-related strategies among participating Australian schools. Having a school bullying policy or process may reinforce the idea within the school that bullying is a serious problem and requires attention by all staff (VanZooeren & Weisz, 2018). Although resources and staff time are required for successful implementation of whole-school bullying-related strategies (Cross et al., 2011).

Providing staff with assigned time out of the classroom to address bullying reports was identified as a strategy to improve staff responses. Other studies have also shown that staff have expressed lack of time, support and resources to address bullying situations (Mishna et al., 2005). If staff are relieved of their classroom duties and provided with allocated time to deal with student reports, the likelihood of staff dismissing an incident may be reduced. As students are often reluctant to report bullying incidents to staff (Shaw et al., 2019), it is essential that staff are provided with the support and resources necessary to effectively respond to student reports outside of the classroom. Having a private area to converse with students involved in bullying incidents was considered essential by some staff to ensure that students feel comfortable and supported when voicing their concerns.

Additionally, keeping a school record of bullying incidents was identified as a strategy to improve staff responses. Some participants in our study have reported difficulty in assessing whether non-witnessed incidents could be classified as bullying and keeping a school record of bullying incidents could assist staff in determining appropriate responses. Participants in other studies have also reported difficulty in assessing whether non-witnessed incidents could be classified as bullying as they must rely on the student's recollection of events (Mishna et al., 2005). Determining appropriate responses to bullying incidents that were not witnessed has been recognised as a difficult task and could potentially lead to lack of intervention if staff are not equipped with prior training and have a limited understanding of bullying (Mishna et al., 2005). Schools may consider developing guidelines or policies about accessing these databases of bullying

incidents to maintain the privacy and safety of students and ensure compliance with record keeping standards.

A final strategy identified to improve staff responses is regular professional development on understanding bullying and how to deal with complex situations. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) also found teacher training to be an effective strategy to decrease bullying. Providing targeted and professional development opportunities for school staff is an effective component of whole-school anti-bullying strategies (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2001). As supported in the literature (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Nicolaides et al., 2002), staff want additional training to increase their ability to address complex situations. Some participants in our study perceived bullying situations to be complex and further training was wanted on how to respond to different situations. Staff training and professional development opportunities are necessary for assessing and responding to reported bullying incidents (Boulton, 1997; Craig et al., 2000). Bradshaw et al. (2007) exploration of staff and student experiences with bullying found that staff would benefit from additional skills focused training on how to intervene in different situations appropriately. While some staff noted lack of time as a barrier to completing additional training, they acknowledged that they would complete the training as they understand how beneficial it would be for the students. This shows a willingness from staff to be equipped to address bullying.

Based on our study findings, whole-school strategies to improve staff responses to student reports of bullying behaviour rely largely on the support of school leadership teams. Key components of successful anti-bullying interventions in schools can be a time-consuming commitment (Gaffney et al., 2021). Relieving staff of their teaching responsibilities to attend professional development sessions and address bullying incidents, and developing streamlined reporting processes and clearer policies may help to ensure reported bullying incidents are addressed consistently and effectively. As key players in preventing bullying in schools, staff should be involved in future school bullying prevention initiatives (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003; Yoon et al., 2011).

## Strengths and Limitations

This appears to be the first qualitative study to explore staff responses when students report bullying incidents. Qualitative research is useful when exploring complex phenomena such as staff responses to bullying (Pope & Mays, 1995). Despite needing to contact many schools, we were able to achieve a sufficient sample size with a range of classroom teachers, school administrators and health service staff. The low response rate during our recruitment phase can be attributed to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as schools were

instructed by their governing bodies to focus on core teaching and activities and avoid non-essential research projects.

A limitation of this study was only recruiting Catholic and Independent primary schools and schools with an ICSEA of > 1000. Government schools could not be recruited as the approval process to conduct research on government school sites exceeded the time allocated to this project. Although female participants were over-represented in this study, this is representative of national data that shows 82% of primary school teachers in 2021 in Australia were female (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). As the majority of our sample were born in Australia, we were also unable to examine cultural differences in staff responses. Although, in 2020, it was reported that only 30% of Australia's resident population were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b).

Future researchers may want to further explore differences in staff responses by gender, ethnicity, staff role and school sector, and explore the responses of staff working within the government school sector. Future researchers may also want to conduct mixed-methods studies that include government-funded schools and explore differences in staff responses by gender and ethnicity. While this study only addressed the individual factors of school staff, future studies should address individual factors of students that potentially impact staff responses, as well as staff responses when students report cyberbullying.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that responding to student reports of bullying is a difficult task due to the complexity of bullying situations and overwhelming responsibilities of staff. Our findings highlight the need for refined school bullying policies and procedures, additional staff training on understanding bullying and how to address complex situations, assigned school hours to deal with reported bullying incidents and keeping a school database of bullying incidents. The study findings have the potential to inform antibullying policies, practices and strategies to help staff when responding to student reports of bullying behaviour and improve the lives of students.

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**Data Availability** All data, materials and coding are available upon request. EG, SB, JF formulated the research questions and methodology.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Office at The University of Western Australia (RA/4/20/4995) and the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University (HRE2021-0113), Governance approval was provided by Catholic Education Western Australia.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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